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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effectiveness of a program for at-risk parents designed to improve family reading and thus prepare at-risk children for school. The program, "Ready for Reading," consists of three two-hour sessions conducted with parents at their children's school while the children are in pre-kindergarten classes in various towns in southern Illinois. Parents are given a packet of three children's books, a guide with easy-to-make home activities, pamphlets, a calendar, and a coupon for an additional book to be redeemed at their local public library. Periodic home visits continue throughout the school year. Program evaluation is provided by a comparison of initial intake forms and information gathered at the follow-up visits, anecdotal records, and teacher observations. Results indicated that: (1) the strongest factor to encourage participation seemed to be networking with a pre-kindergarten provider that was already established and accepted in the local community; (2) communication between the family literacy teachers and the networking agencies was extremely important; (3) projects in each of the six communities served were flexible; and (4) the illiterate population was the hardest to reach. (RS)

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Ready for Reading: A Community College Approach to Family Literacy

A paper presented at
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by
Barbara Bauernfeind

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Rapid changes in our society have brought the illiteracy problem into sharper focus. In the not too distant past, people with reading disabilities could function in this society relatively easily. Jobs were readily available in factories, mines, farms and a multitude of other places where manual labor was the only requirement. With the development of technology, reading skills are now a very important part of most any job. Those who historically have been able to "get by" are now being "left behind". Twenty-three million Americans, or one in five, are functionally illiterate. They have been the target of numerous literacy organizations' efforts. Illinois statistics indicate that in spite of efforts only two to three percent of the illiterate population has been reached (Rake, 1990).

The purpose of this study was to determine if a program for at-risk parents would improve family reading and thus help prepare at-risk children for school. Illiterate parents, most often, produce illiterate children. "In other words, children emulate their parents. Illiteracy will beget illiteracy; literacy will beget literacy". ..."The lack of basic literacy skills is a primary cause of unemployment and therefore poverty" (Darling, 1898, p.ii). The problem of illiteracy will be solved much more quickly if we can find a way to reach into the homes and help create changes. Parents do not want to see their children fail; they want success for their children, but do not know how to help. Ready for Reading adheres to the belief that parents are the child's first and most influential teacher (Office of Education Research, 1987). Parents of children enrolled in at-risk, pre-kindergarten programs are

eligible to participate. They are encouraged to believe they can make a difference in their child's success by providing these parents with children's books and training to use those books.

Method

For a program of this type to succeed in southern Illinois, networking with other family service providers is imperative. This networking identifies a population that is already aware of a need and have sought help to meet their needs. In addition, nearly all family service providers do not have the funds necessary to support a full gamut of services for their families and are quite pleased to network with other agencies that will supplement their work.

Ready for Reading was designed to provide parents with the skills and beginning materials they will need to encourage reading with their young children. Three two-hour sessions are conducted with parents at the child's school while the children are in Pre-K classes. At the sessions teachers stress that parents are the child's first teacher and for many years to come the child will emulate his/her parents behavior. Thus if the parent creates a need for and stresses the importance of reading, the preschooler will value reading. Parents are given a packet of three children's books, a guide with easy-to-make home activities, pamphlets, a calendar and a coupon for an additional book to be redeemed at their local public library. The teachers share strategies to use with children, discuss appropriate times to read, how to read to a child and how to involve the child in the story. Many parents have low level reading skills, therefore, alternative methods of book sharing are demonstrated. Parents are encouraged and given

opportunity to enroll in Adult Basic Education or Literacy classes. In addition, teachers demonstrate appropriate and inappropriate reading situations. Parents discuss what was good and what could have been better in the activities demonstrated by the teacher. Children and parents have an opportunity to "practice" what the parents have learned at the second session with the teacher observing. Children then return to their Pre-K class, and a discussion is conducted with the teacher noting her observations of each parent/child situation. Parents were asked to use their calendar to record the days and amount of time they read to their child. These at-home reading activities are discussed at the second and third sessions to share pleasant and unpleasant experiences, and how unpleasant situations could be improved. Parents view three videos during the course of the sessions: 1) Parents as Teachers produced by the Illinois State Board of Education; 2) First Things First produced by PBS; and 3) Accessing Schools produced by PLUS. The third session includes a trip to the public library to redeem the coupon for an additional book, and opportunity is given for parents to apply for a library card after they have met the librarian and toured the library. Users fees for cards are paid by Ready for Reading if the family resides outside the city limit. Contact is continued with the families following initial sessions through follow-up parent/child reading related activities conducted at the child's classroom. Both the Pre-K teacher and the family literacy teacher plan the activity to coordinate with the child's curriculum. Parents are learning they are an important part of their child's educational process.

Home visitation is a component of Ready for Reading. Initial intake forms assessing family reading habits were filled out upon entry to Ready for Reading, and the home visit allows the teacher to reassess those family reading habits providing remediation and helpful suggestions when necessary. Periodic home visits continue throughout the school year to assist families.

Those parents whose children participate a second year in Head Start or Pre-K are invited to attend sessions the second year and receive a second packet containing three additional children's books.

Evaluation is provided by a comparison of initial intake forms and information gathered at the follow-up visits, anecdotal records and teacher observation. Information is shared at bi-monthly staff meetings, and necessary program adjustments are made. Family literacy teachers also meet periodically with the Pre-K staff they are serving and the public librarians in each community to discuss program information and elicit suggestions for program improvements.

Results

Although the entire project operates under the same guidelines, each community is at a different stage of development because of length of operation, community differences and the individual approaches of the teachers. Therefore, the report of results will be divided into communities served by one teacher. The report will include 1) length of operation; 2) networking agencies; 3) number of identified eligible children and 4) number of participants served.

Mt. Vernon

The Mt. Vernon, Illinois, project has been in operation since October, 1989. The Head Start Program and the Mt. Vernon City Schools Pre-K Program are the at-risk provider agencies. The two programs identified approximately 165 students to be at-risk upon entry to school.

McLeansboro

The McLeansboro, Illinois, project has been in operation since January, 1990. The Hamilton County District 10 Pre-K and Child Care Center is the main networking agency, however, the Head Start Program has indicated an interest in participating. District 10 identified 125 at-risk preschoolers.

Benton, Zeigler-Royalton

The project operating in Benton, Zeigler, and Royalton, Illinois, also began in January, 1990. The Pre-K providers in this area are the Region V Pre-K from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois, the Early On Program for Franklin County, and Head Start for Benton. Through these contacts 65 children were identified to fill the program vacancies. More at-risk children and families reside in the area, but only 65 spaces were available.

Sesser, Pinckneyville, Christopher

The project operating in these areas also began January, 1990. The Region V Pre-K from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois, is the only Pre-K provider in the area. Again they could only provide for 65 children in their program.

Conclusions

With 43% of southern Illinoisans not being high school graduates, and 16% of that 43% having less than an eighth grade education (Smith, 1990), it is evident that something must be done to curb this trend. Utilizing a family intervention program to address educational needs should provide one vehicle to raise literacy levels of both parents and children.

The strongest factor to encourage project participation seemed to be networking with a Pre-K provider that was already established and accepted in a local community. Mt. Vernon's and McLeansboro's Pre-K providers have been serving parents and children for several years and have become a trusted community program. By networking with an established provider, family literacy parent training is viewed as "O.K." and parents more readily attend. Also recruiting those parents is much easier since the children's teachers encourage parents to attend sessions. Opportunities are also available for family literacy teachers to advertise their sessions at parent meetings held at the child's school. The family literacy teachers working in communities where the child component of the program was also new had a much more difficult time building their parent participation. Newly established Pre-K programs could only provide service to a smaller number of students, therefore, a smaller number of parents were eligible to participate.

Communication between the family literacy teachers and the networking agencies was found to be extremely important. It was discovered some agencies were suspect of the project's motives. They feared a new program trying to duplicate their services and

therefore, competition for funding would result. Through several meetings and much dialogue, those wary providers began to view the project as one that only sought to supplement their program not supplant it.

One refreshing discovery has been the flexibility of the project. Originally, the curriculum was outlined to proceed first with publicity and recruitment followed by parent sessions, book distribution, home and library visits and finally in-class follow-up sessions. The McLeansboro project changed the order, using in-class sessions first as a tool to recruit parents for sessions, and it has worked quite well. Other teachers have arranged project components to meet their needs with success.

The final, and not surprising, conclusion is that the illiterate population is still the hardest to reach. This project targeted public aid parents as prime recipients, and participation from this group has been good. However, those parents choosing to participate have been the most educated. It has been difficult to reach the illiterate population.

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